In search of the Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa

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So there I was, gazing up the slope of a small mountain at the Matenadaran high above. My task was to climb that hill, and to contrive some way of convincing the library's director to let me examine the manuscripts I had come to see. This day's work would be the equivalent, for my overall work, of climbing the first few steps toward my goal -- a critical edition of the Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa.

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Matthew's Chronicle was composed during the decade between 1130 and 1140. His hometown, Edessa, was at that time a majority-Christian city, populated primarily by Syrians and Armenians. Until the Crusades swept into the area thirty years previously, it had been ruled on behalf of Byzantium by an Armenian prince. As the crusading knights marched toward Jerusalem, one of their number had taken advantage of Armenian antipathy toward their prince to become the ruler of Edessa in his own right, and had consolidated his position to establish the first of the Crusader states in the East. Initially, the Armenians welcomed the Franks as "liberators" from their Greek or Turkish suzerains, but they quickly grew disillusioned as they observed the Frankish nobles acting for Frankish interests, rather than Armenian ones. The emperor of Constantinople, who considered Edessa to be an imperial possession that had been effectively stolen by its Crusader count, contested Frankish rule; the Turks never ceased their attempts to gain the city. It is against this turbulent background that Matthew came to write his history.

Historiographical scholarship for this era recognizes two sorts of history, which can be defined via blatant stereotypes. The first is the "literary" history; like Homer or Thucydides, the literary historian sets out to tell his tale in well-formed prose, making copious allusions to older, well-respected literary works. The literary historian is not so concerned with the precise dates of events, nor the nu-

merological significance of those dates. He is likewise unconcerned with literal truth; if the deeper truth of an event can be communicated by changing some of its prosaic details to better echo a historical pattern from days of yore, so much the better.

The second type of historical writing is the world chronicle. A "true" world chronicle -- remember that we are speaking in stereotypes -- must begin its account with the Creation, and must catalogue all its events according to their year, down to the present day. The chronicler is free to include the information that he likes; a common aim is to demonstrate the ways in which the sins of his people has led to their punishment by God. In comparison to the literary history, the chronicle is a boring read, devoid of any literary merit. Ignorant of the higher literature studied by the literary historian, and unable therefore to replicate that historian's elevated style, the chronicler must use the lesser model of the Bible as his primary influence. It will come as no surprise that the line between "literary history" and "chronicle" is an exceedingly blurry one; it will also come as no surprise that, despite the ever-increasing understanding of just how blurry this line is, the chronicle continues to suffer from a stigma of being considered dull, repetitive, ignorant, and without literary value.

The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa, as its English name suggests, is in the style of a world chronicle. Like many of the chroniclers of the later Middle Ages, Matthew begins his account not with the Creation, but with a year sufficiently far in the past to satisfy his purpose in writing. His stated purpose, true to his genre, is to illustrate the misfortunes that have befallen the Armenian people, and to search for the roots of these misfortunes in their own history. The text has been divided by editors into three parts, covering progressively more events over progressively shorter time periods. The first part, which covers the years between 401 and 500 of the Armenian era (952-1051), begins with no preamble. The second part covers the years 502 to 550 of the Armenian era (1053-1101), and begins with a short explanation of Matthew's motivations, and the methods he has so far employed in writing about the history. The third covers the years 550 to 577 of the Armenian era (1101-1128). It is prefaced with a longer explanation which gives the majority of the information we have about Matthew himself, and the history he wished to write.

The only biographical information that exists about Matthew is given in his short introductory passages. He was a monk, the superior of a monastery in Edessa, and unlike the usual writers of history in this era, he was not a scholar. He set out to write the history of one hundred and eighty years, but put the work aside for a time before beginning to write the history of the final thirty years.

When he began the second part of his history, he explained that he had been working on the project for eight years; in the preface to his third book, that number has jumped to fifteen. Matthew did not complete the history that he intended. His last chronicle entry is for the Armenian year 528, two years short of his goal.

When exactly was Matthew writing? The preface to Part 2 suggests that it was written in or after the Armenian year 580 (1131/2); in the preface to Part 3 he implies that seven years have passed since his work on parts 1 and 2. Since he did not finish writing about the 30-year period to the Armenian year 580, it is likely that he died not long after writing the preface to Part 3, which would put his date of death around 1138 or 1139.

The Chronicle was continued by a priest named Gregory, who lived in the nearby town of Kesoun. Gregory did not choose to take up the narrative where Matthew left off. His relatively short text begins eight years after Matthew's text ends, in the year 585 (1136). Gregory shifts the primary focus of the Chronicle from Edessa to the nearby town of Kesoun. Much of the text consists of a funerary oration by Barsegh, the katholikos of Ani, composed for Baldwin, the Crusader lord of Kesoun, in 1146. Gregory's style of arrangement is not as chronologically straighforward as Matthew's; although he retains the world-chronicle style and notes the year at the beginning of most of his passages, those passages are not necessarily in order by year. The continuation extends the original chronicle up to the year 611 (1162/3). There is no indication in Gregory's text of his relationship to Matthew, the circumstances of his acquisition of the text, his reasons for writing the continuation, or the dates during which he writes.

Prior scholarship on Matthew's Chronicle

Modern scholarship on the Chronicle almost invariably treats Matthew's text and Gregory's as a single unit. The first printed publication of the combined text was not in Armenian. In 1850, Edouard Dulaurier published a partial French translation, entitled “Récit de la première Croisade”, of the portion of the Chronicle that begins in AM[???] and ends in AM611.

In 1858, Dulaurier published a translation of the entire Chronicle. He based his translation upon the two manuscripts held by the Bibliothèque Nationale, and upon a copy made for him by a scribe at the Mekhitarist monastery in Venice. This copy, covering the years 545 to 611 in the Armenian era

(1096 - 1162), was based on four or five exemplars held in the Venice library, and the copyist noted the variants he encountered in the source manuscripts. The translation Dulaurier produced was the only published version of the Chronicle, in any language, for 11 years.

The next printed edition of Matthew's text was in his own language. In 1869, an Armenian edition of the full history was published, based upon the three manuscripts held by the Armenian library in Jerusalem, and on Dulaurier's translation where appropriate.

This 1869 edition was itself consulted for the preparation of the edition that stands today -- the 1898 Vagharshapat edition, published by Mambre Melik-Adamean and Nerses Ter Mik'ayelian. The editors consulted six manuscripts as well as the Jerusalem text; all six of these manuscripts are held in the Matenadaran, the Armenian national library in Yerevan.

The base text of the Vagharshapat edition is taken from Matenadaran manuscript 1896, which was copied in 1689 at the Amrdolu monastery in Bitlis. The editors recorded divergences with the other five manuscripts, and with the Jerusalem edition, in footnotes to the text. Unfortunately, when the Vagharshapat text was re-printed alongside the modern Armenian translation by Hratch Bartikian in 1973, the footnotes were discarded. As a result, most copies of the Vagharshapat text in print today have been reduced to little more than a transcription of a single, albeit interesting, manuscript.

Since 1898, there have been two further translations of Matthew's history. A Turkish translation was published in 1962, and an English translation in 1991. Neither of these venture deeply into scholarship of the text itself.

These early editors of Matthew's Chronicle have all made a glaring mistake concerning the division of the text into "original" and "continuation"; this mistake and its perpetuation is a good example of the lack of detailed scholarship so far given to the Chronicle. In his first translation of 1858, Dulaurier assigns the chronicle entry for the Armenian year 585 (1136) to the third part of Matthew's history, rather than to the continuation by Gregory. He does not explain his rationale for doing so, and it is a strange decision for a number of reasons. There is an eight year gap between Matthew's last chronicle entry and this one. The focus of the entry for 585 shifts to Kesoun, which is suddenly referred to as "our city". In his prefaces, Matthew never indicated an intention to extend his history beyond the year 580 (1131/2). In the face of this evidence, and in the absence of any rationale for his decision, one must assume that Dulaurier simply chose to believe that the text was

Matthew's up to the point at which Gregory identified himself. All the subsequent editors and translators of Matthew's history have accepted this error, despite numerous annotations on manuscripts that contradict it;

As a result of this error and its wide acceptance, those who have attempted to speculate upon biographical details for Matthew must account for a presumed move to Kesoun and a sudden death around the year 1136. Dulaurier himself, convinced that Matthew had retired to Kesoun, looks to the 1136 siege in that city for an explanation of Matthew's sudden demise. Others, including the Armenian literary surveyor James Etmekjian, content themselves simply with asserting that he lived in Kesoun for the later portion of his life.

Apart from the work done by editors and translators, there has been no serious study of the text, despite its wide use in historical works on the Crusades and on Byzantium, Armenia, and the Near East during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The literary survey of Srbouti Hairapetian, published in 1995, describes the Chronicle thus:

> After the twelfth century Armenian historiography lost its artistic character and became a dry chronological record. The artistic flair, which infused Armenian historiography with its lyricism, constructed its models, characters, and actions, manifesting itself in works of literary value, gradually gave way to chronicles and annals devoid of their former literary merit. Such was the *Chronicle* of the historian Matthew of Edessa, covering the events from 952 to 1136.

Little wonder, then, that study of the text has been desultory.

Methodology

The task now set before me is to construct a critical edition of Matthew's history. The aim of a critical edition is to determine, as closely as is possible from the surviving manuscripts, the history that Matthew actually wrote. The original Vagharshapat edition of 1898 may be considered a critical edition, although the disappearance of its footnotes from later re-prints renders the edition uncritical after all. Even for the 1898 edition, though, the question remains -- do the manuscripts they chose represent the best manuscripts for comparison? Could one construct a better edition, based on manuscripts held outside Yerevan?

The most significant barrier to a critical edition of Matthew's Chronicle is the large number of

manuscripts, and their wide dispersal. There are at least 36 surviving non-fragmentary manuscripts of Matthew's history. Twenty of these are held in the Matenadaran, and the rest are held in several different libraries across Europe, Jerusalem, and Lebanon. The earliest extant manuscript, Venice 887, was copied between 1590 and 1597 in Aleppo by Pawlos, a priest from Marzivan. By 1700, many more copies had been made, twenty of which survive today.

My first goal was to create a stemma, or manuscript family tree, for the manuscripts that do survive. For the purposes of my stemma, I have limited myself to manuscripts that were copied before 1700. There is evidence that a few later copyists made an attempt to combine several manuscripts into one "improved" copy of the Chronicle, but in all of these cases, the manuscripts these copyists used have survived, and are included in the stemma.

In order to create a basis for manuscript analysis, I used an optical character recognition (OCR) program to "read" the 1973 published text and convert it into a computer plain-text file. The character recognition was not perfect, but gave well over 99% accuracy. In order to transcribe a manuscript, I am now able simply to make a copy of the computer text file and edit it to match the contents of the manuscript. This results in a much more accurate copy of the text than I might have produced by direct typing transcription. It is important to note that, although my transcription method began with the use of the 1973 printed edition, that text itself is not the basis for my own critical edition. It serves only as a medium for faster transcription of the manuscripts that I will use, and my own edition will not be based upon it.

Although entries in catalogues provide a great deal of information about the contents of their manuscripts, the catalogue information on its own is not sufficient, in this case, to construct a stemma. Many of the manuscripts must be examined in situ, and it was therefore necessary to devise a mechanism for useful, but quick, comparison.

The mechanism I devised makes use of two manuscripts of the Chronicle that are held in the UK. The first, in the British Library, was copied in 1660 from an exemplar whose text reaches only to the Armenian year 546 (1097). The second, in the Bodleian library, is an eighteenth-century copy that contains no information about its scribes, the location where it was copied, or the exemplar that the scribes might have followed. Although these manuscripts were likely to be eliminated from use in a critical edition, their differences from each other and from the printed text were sufficient to provide a starting point. Using the OCR-transcribed edition text, I transcribed both these manuscripts

into separate computer files. I modified an open-source file comparison program to display the textual differences between the manuscripts, and between each manuscript and the OCR-transcribed edition. From the resulting set of differences, I chose about twenty passages of varying magnitude as "markers".

In September 2007, I was able to visit the Matenadaran and examine twelve manuscripts in their holdings, including all of the seventeenth-century copies of the Chronicle. In addition to noting the beginning and end of the text of the Chronicle in each manuscript, as well as any colophons present, I constructed a "fingerprint" for each manuscript. The fingerprint records, for each manuscript, the variant present in that manuscript for each of my markers. Although none of these markers can be used in isolation to determine the place of a given manuscript in a stemma, taken together they give a fairly good guide to the relative closeness of manuscripts to each other.

The manuscript tradition

The lack of surviving specimens prior to 1590, and the abundance of specimens between 1590 and 1700, render it difficult to construct a reliable stemma for all of these manuscripts. That said, there are enough markers of dependence between the manuscripts that a tentative stemma may be constructed, as seen in the following diagram.

[SLIDE: Stemma 1]

A, the manuscript upon which the Vagharshapat edition was based, contains two significant passages of text -- one in part 1, covering the Armenian years 465 to 478, and the other in part 2, covering the Armenian years 518 to 519 -- that are absent from every other manuscript examined. Matthew's Chronicle is the first text in that manuscript, but the Chronicle begins with a short excerpt from the end of Mesrop's history of Nerses the Great that was observed by the editors of the 1869 Jerusalem edition, and that is the mark of group αγδ.

There came a break in the manuscript tradition, represented by group βε, wherein the Chronicle was dissociated with the history of Nerses the Great, and began to be transmitted with a characteristic sequence of other works. In this group, the Chronicle always immediately follows a treatise by the thirteenth-century scholar Ishawx, and occasionally follows an essay "On Wine and Drunkenness". It almost always precedes a history by the fourteenth-century scholar T'ovma Mecopec'i. In

none of these manuscripts is the text of the Chronicle complete. The most complete text, found in B, extends to the Armenian year 554 (1105/6); most of the others end with an account of a comet that appeared in the Armenian year 546 (1097).

[SLIDE: Stemma 2]

The oldest extant manuscript is D, which was copied in Aleppo between 1590 and 1600. The text of this manuscript, found in group αγδ, was divided into chapters by the scribe or by the scribe's exemplar. These chapter divisions help to reinforce the mis-assignment to the Chronicle of the characteristic excerpt of Mesrop's history of Nerses.

[SLIDE: Stemma 3]

The three manuscripts used in the 1869 Jerusalem edition are all descendants of this manuscript.

There are a number of manuscripts transmitted alongside Mesrop's history of Nerses whose beginnings I have been unable to ascertain. I have assigned these a common ancestor with D, labeled δ in the stemma. Further analysis of the text will be necessary in order to better ascertain their relationship with the D group.

One manuscript, C, displays a marked textual affinity with A, although it lacks the two significant passages present in A. The beginning of the Chronicle's text is absent from this manuscript; the first nine pages were left blank by the scribe. It is thus impossible to determine whether the missing text may have contained the characteristic excerpt from Mesrop's history of Nerses. The missing text also precludes the possibility that C was an ancestor to A. I have therefore postulated an ancestor of C, labelled γ in the stemma, which shares a common ancestor with A, and which represents the original deletion of the two passages present in Matenadaran 1896 and the common ancestor.

[SLIDE: Stemma 2]

Within group βε, the oldest extant manuscript is E, copied in 1601 at Constantinople. It cannot have been the exemplar for the more complete text found in B, but the two manuscripts are certainly related; their common ancestor is labelled β in the stemma. Based upon similarities in the text, certain manuscripts may be considered descendants of E; the others are currently displayed in the stemma with a common ancestor ε. Further examination of these texts will be necessary in order to more reliably determine their relationship.

[SLIDE: Stemma 4]

Five of the six manuscripts used by the 1898 Vagharshapat edition are represented in this stemma;

the sixth was a nineteenth-century copy, based upon one or more manuscripts that are represented here. The editors of the 1898 edition have picked a reasonably good range of manuscripts upon which to base their edition; however, their restriction to manuscripts held in Armenia has precluded the use of some manuscripts which may provide text that was closer to the original.

[SLIDE: Stemma 5]

Based upon the stemma presented here, a critical edition should be based upon the manuscripts A, C, D, B, and E. The stemma is, however, subject to change; further examination of manuscripts may prove the need to incorporate other manuscripts, such as L, M, G, or V.